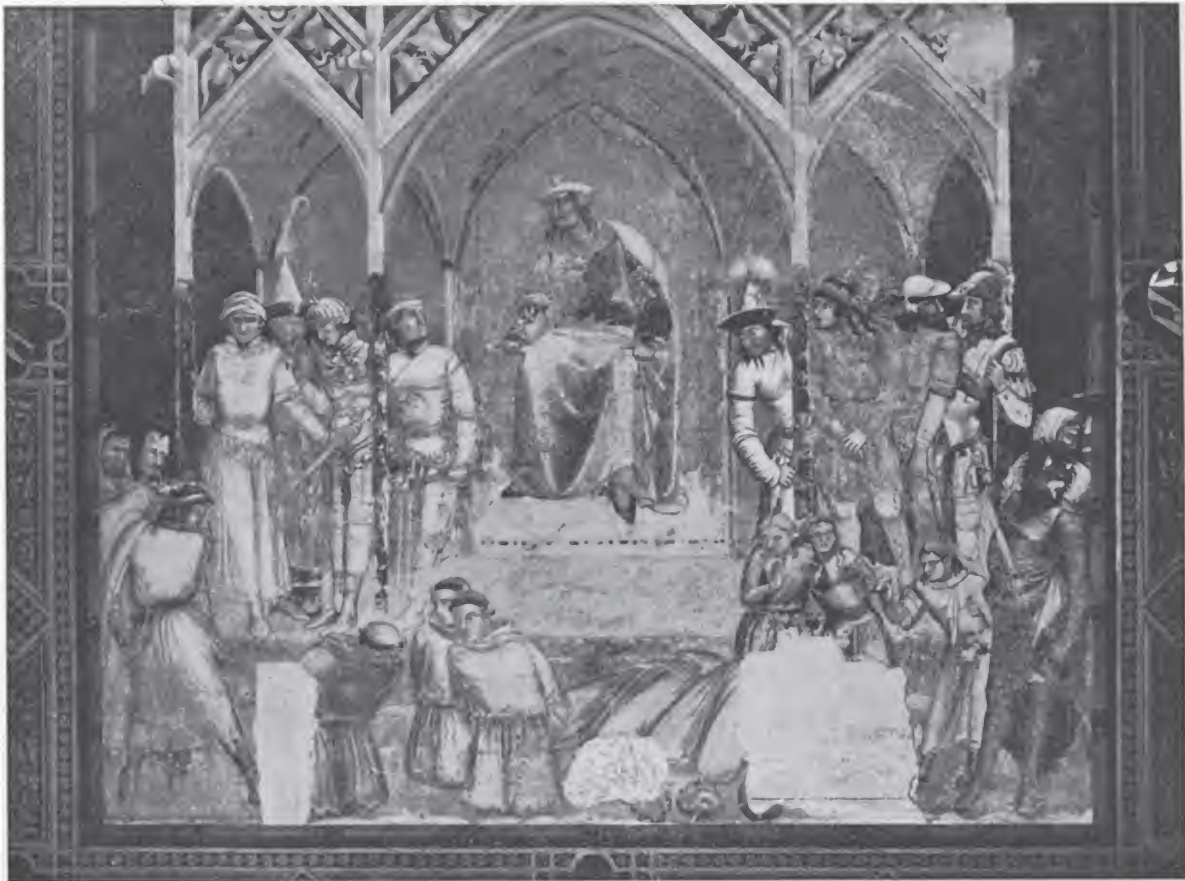


# THE "ORIENTAL" CHARACTER IN ITALIAN TRE- AND QUATTROCENTO PAINTINGS



Ambrogio Lorenzetti: Fresco illustrating the Martyrdom of Franciscans at Centa, in the Church of S. Francesco - Siena.

**I**t is not only a great pleasure, but also a great honour for me as an Oriental scholar, to have this opportunity of explaining to you, at this famous University of Rome, some of my ideas on the early Renaissance paintings, which inspired me more than anything else, when I

came to Italy for the first time in 1921, and which still inspire me in this visit, after the lapse of thirty years, with the same unimpaired enthusiasm. Indeed at that time, coming from the distant seas in the East as a young art-student and wandering into the Uffizi Gallery, I was almost taken aback by the art of



Botticelli and others, which immediately went deep into my heart, and which seemed so near to my sense of beauty, that it seemed as if these paintings were painted for me, and for no one else — young enthusiasm sometimes gives one such a self-centred feeling, every lover of art knows it! This sudden inspiration upsetting the program of my trip at the time, I decided to stay in Florence and to devote myself to the study of Botticelli and the Quattrocento. In Florence, I began to frequent the library of my dear old teacher Mr. Berenson, where I learned very much. Also by travelling up and down Italy, I came to know and admire Masolino and Piero della Francesca immensely. At the same time, Sieneese masters, Duccio, Simone Martini and others, exercised on me a strangely unforgettable charm. Unfortunately, however, after some years I had to hasten back to Japan, where the big earthquake had killed my father and devastated my house. Barely finishing my work on Botticelli, which I meant to be the first of my Italian studies, I left Italy. Once back in my country, being appointed Director of the Art Research Institute at Tokyo, I had naturally to concentrate more on Far Eastern Arts as my principal work, although I did not cease to be interested in Italian Art. But gradually, getting away from any Italian studies, here I come back, no more as a specialist of the Quattrocento, but as an old scholar of Chinese and Japanese arts.

And yet, what really astonishes me is that, visiting Italian galleries and churches over again, these long years of separation, during which my special study went over to another direction, did not at all change my old enthusiasm for the Tre- and Quattrocento, whose masterpieces still look to me like my spiritual brothers, and talk to me with intimate languages. All this is altogether fascinating and wonderful! Why is that? What came about? According to my idea, that is because in the Early Renaissance painting there is something which causes an irrepressible resonance in my inmost heart. In other words, because there is what I may call an « Oriental » character contained in it.

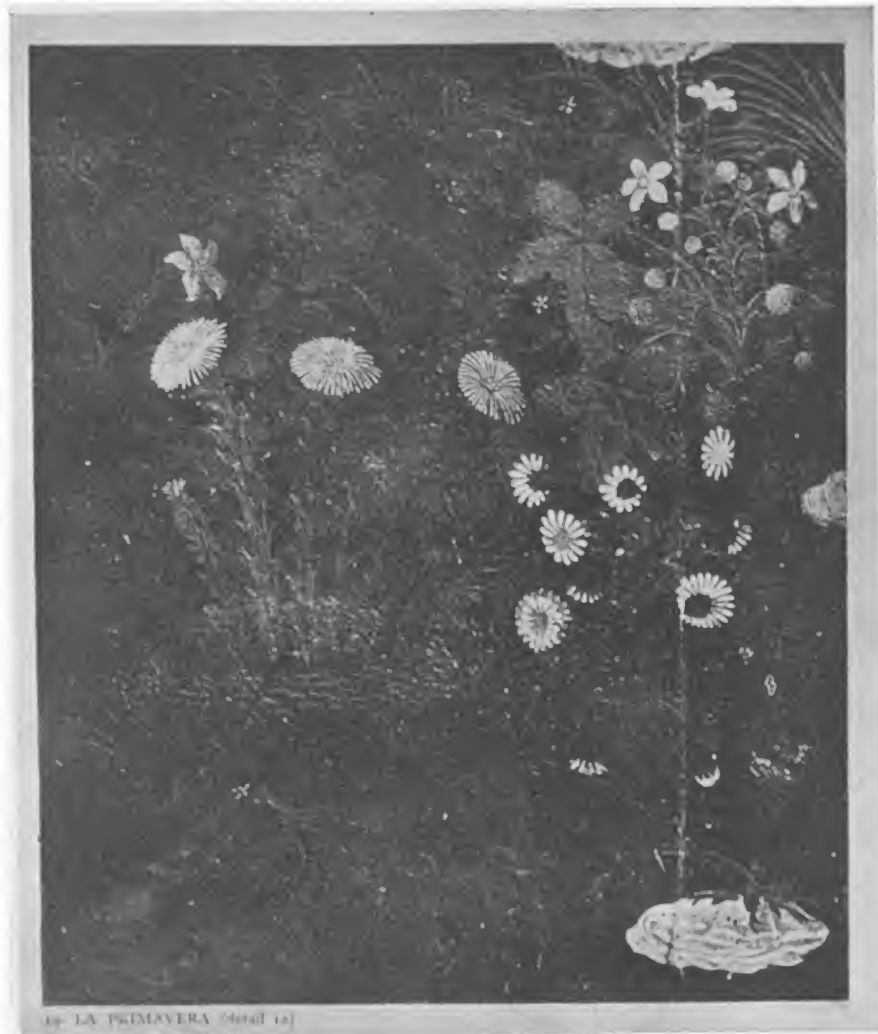
Of course, I am not the first, who felt a sort of « Oriental » character in Italian art. Many people have felt it likewise, and scholars have written articles and books on the subject, in order to give some historical explanations of it. The mountains painted by Leonardo da Vinci, especially in the background of Monna Lisa,

were sometimes found to be very « Chinese », and it was explained, in connection with the fantastic theory of his trip to the East. Botticelli's art, which is remarkably beautiful in its linear construction, was often taken to be extremely « Oriental », and when I was devoted to its study many friends of mine, not only sympathised with me for my devotion to him as an Oriental, but also imagined I was writing a book on him, in order to connect his art with that of the Far East with some historical relationship. When Sieneese painters began to be more seriously studied their very fine and delicate sense of line, full of sentiment, mixed with some shade of mysticism, was considered extremely « Oriental », and the aesthetic quality of their representatives, Simone Martini, Sassetta and others, was often appreciated in reference to Chinese and Japanese paintings.

When such « Oriental » character began to be discussed, art-historians were not slow to push their documentary and archaeological researches into this field, in order, historically, to connect Italy with the East, and their efforts were repaid by discoveries of many interesting facts, that Italy and the East, even the Far East, were not entirely cut apart, despite the great distance between them. There *were* some actual contacts, which at least indicate the possibility of some Far Eastern influences on the art of the Early Renaissance. To quote the most remarkable example; in the fresco describing the Martyrdom of Franciscans at Ceuta in the Church of S. Francesco at Siena, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in 1331, there is, at least, one Chinese represented, and Monsieur Soulier in his work « *Les Influences Orientales dans la Peinture Toscane* » is right to connect this representation, too realistic to be just a work of fantasy, with the passage through Tuscany of some Ambassadors sent from the Tartar courts in South Russia, where many Mongols and Chinese must have served, to the Pope and Christian Kings in Europe in the early years of the fourteenth century. This was recorded by the historian Giovanni Villani, at the time. Indeed, the passage of some Chinese through Italy in such an early period is both interesting and historically significant, but we must take care not to attach too much importance to it from the view point of art-history. The travel of some vagrant Chinese through Italy would not give any influence of Chinese painting on the Italian, just as the trip



Detail of « La Primavera » by Botticelli.



of Marco Polo to China did not affect Chinese art in any visible degree.

Although in this way, I think it difficult to admit any direct influence of Chinese painting on Early Renaissance, yet I am far from denying the possibility of some indirect influence through the intermediary of Byzantine and other arts. Prof. Strzygowski's proposition, « Rom oder Orient », was a very suggestive one, turning our attention to the great quantities of Oriental elements contained in the mediaeval arts of Europe, which were, after all, the ground from which the Renaissance art grew up. Byzantine art was like a vast melting pot, into which almost all Eastern Arts, near and far, poured their contributions. That the Byzantine Empire communicated with China of the Tang Dynasty can be gathered from Chinese history and is also proved by the works of art presumably of Byzantine origin, which arrived in Japan through China, at the

time. By such an intermediary, unexpected elements of Eastern Arts were actually carried far and deep into the West. Influences of Byzantine art, or rather influences of Eastern Arts put together in various combinations in it, were brought to Italy with particular richness and strength, when East Mediterranean and Italian seaports were closely connected by the Crusades.

Besides the Byzantine art, which was the most important connecting link between East and West, long before it, we must consider also the art of the so-called animal-style of the nomadic tribes, sometimes identified as Scythians of Greek history, who seem to have wandered East and West through the interminable plains from Siberia to Russia, in the darkness of pre-history, and scattered similar motives of animal-design through this wide expanse, as far East as China of Warring States and of the Han Dynasty, and as far West as the region of Celtic culture. Then, of course, there was the inva-



sion of Alexander the Great into India, but its influence was much greater in transplanting Western culture towards the East. After Byzantine art, we must think of the Mongol invasions into Europe in the thirteenth century, and of the inter-communications between East and West, resultant from them, of which Marco Polo's trip to China is the most brilliant example, and the aforesaid passage of some Chinese, whose physiognomy and costume were painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti at Siena, was an interesting episode. With all these connections between East and West, it was only natural that various elements of Asiatic arts in various combinations penetrated into Europe. All these multifarious influences from the East, however, must be understood in right proportion and perspective; we must guard ourselves from falling into too exaggerated views.

Limiting my discussion to Italian painting of the Renaissance, I have already said that I do not admit any direct influence of Chinese painting on that of Italy. Instead, I confess, I get the impression that Persian miniature might have exercised some influence. Of course the golden age of Persian miniature properly so called, was in the fifteenth century, but its earlier precursors in Mesopotamia and Armenia and other places in Western Asia were also charming, with abundant trees and flowers, mainly decorative, but strangely realistic, and some of them might have arrived in Italy in time to influence Italian painters of the Early Renaissance. In order to establish these influences more definitely, it would be necessary to make researches in old Italian libraries, if there are Persian or other West-Asian miniatures preserved, and if there are, when they arrived, and so on. In default of such researches, my conclusion for the moment is no more than imaginary. I must be satisfied with giving just a few examples, which leaving deep impressions in my memory, point at least to the possibility of some such influences. That Gentile Bellini went to the court of Sultan Mohammed II in 1479-80 and painted a portrait of a Turkish artist in the style of Persian miniature is well known by the existence of this very interesting portrait in the Gardner Collection at Boston. When I went to Istanbul, in 1928, and saw a great collection of Persian books in one of the museums, I found some of the concentric geometrical designs on the leather-covers, so exactly similar to those famous

designs of knotted cords by Leonardo da Vinci, mentioned by Vasari, that I could not help concluding that Leonardo saw some of those magnificent book-covers at Milan or elsewhere and changing their purely linear, geometric designs into what I may call realistic designs of knotted cords, accomplished his own designs, which appeared to the people of the time perfectly astonishing in cleverness and beauty. Represented in a work of Botticelli's School, I remember I saw a scroll with arabic-like text hanging from a book-shelf, and I was made to imagine that in the bottega of Botticelli such Eastern books or scrolls, often illuminated with miniatures, must have been known and familiarized, to a certain extent. Here I may also add that in some Persian miniatures of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Chinese influences are sometimes visible. If there be any Chinese influence at all in Italian painting of the Renaissance, it would probably be due to the Chinese elements contained in Persian miniatures.

From what I have said, my conclusion is that, besides the various Oriental elements, which were contained in Byzantine art and its derivatives in the Middle ages, and which were naturally inherited by their successor the Renaissance, Persian miniatures might possibly have contributed something to Italian art. If we speak of Oriental influences on Italian painting, these are about all that can be proved on some historical grounds.

To my mind, however, such historical interpretations are much too slight to explain the « Oriental » character, apparent in some of the Early Renaissance paintings. At the outset of my lecture, I told you, with what a deep feeling of kinship I appreciated Simone Martini and Botticelli, Masolino and Piero della Francesca. This is a great, undoubted fact in my experience and I must try to solve it by a careful, retrospective analysis of my own aesthetic feeling.

I take it that the remarkable similarities of nature and climate, and of racial character and sentiment, between Italy and Japan, and also the almost identical similarities in material and technique between the Italian tempera and the Japanese painting, have spontaneously produced the two great arts, which are closely related to each other in spirit and in the sense of beauty.

Similarities of nature and climate in these two countries, sunny and temperate, with ranges of high volcanic snow-capped mountains,





Portrait of a young man painting, signed Bihzâd: copied after Gentile Bellini.  
(Miniature from an album, Herât School, end XV century. Freer Gallery of Art).



surrounded by the bluest of seas, have often been noted by travellers. Under the rule of such Nature, life, food, customs and manners, the way of thinking, taste and sense of beauty of these two peoples could not help approaching to each other, although they belonged to entirely different categories of history. It is not surprising at all that Italy and Japan produced arts, which showed many common features. But these are not all. What is more significant for students of art is that striking similarity in material, technique and expression between Italian tempera and Japanese painting, which must be paid more attention to in the interpretation of the « Oriental » character of the Italian Tre-and Quattrocento.

Paintings of the world are to be divided, roughly speaking, into two classes, by the medium they use: oil painting and water colours. By water colours I do not mean those easy water-colour drawings, which are much favoured by English amateurs, but the painting, for which water is used for solvent instead of oil, and of which Italian tempera *a secco* and *a fresco* was the most important representative in Europe, while in the Far East, especially in Japan, painting has kept to similar water colours with tenacious fidelity from the beginning of history to the present day. This great similarity, or rather this sameness, in material and technique of Italian tempera and Japanese painting, practised by the two people, endowed with similar mentality and sense of beauty, was the essential reason, why Italy and Japan looked much alike in artistic expressions.

Indeed, material and technique play a very important part in artistic expressions. We should pay far more attention to them in our studies of art. We are apt to think that the spiritual content is the principal thing in art, which produces the form of expression suited to it, as its own natural development. But it is not quite so. The way the artistic expression is formulated is not so simple. Material and technique have their own logic and tendency, so to speak, by which they form their own artistic forms, and within the possibilities of these artistic forms, the spiritual content can express itself. To take a conspicuous example, how enormous a revolution, not only in artistic form, but also in spiritual content, was accomplished by the introduction of oil painting into Italy? Although Antonello da Messina first introduced it to Italy, it was really the great genius of Leonardo da Vinci, that at once

discovered and foresaw the great possibilities of expression in this new material and technique, entirely different from that of tempera, and, despite many failures in experiments, accomplished that enormous artistic revolution, which, closing the Quattrocento, opened the way to the glorious Cinquecento, and, thence, inevitably to the grandiose and heavy Baroque. That decisive change experienced by the same Italian people, from the Quattrocento, cheerful and naive in sentiment, clear and variegated in colour, and decorative and detailed in delineation, to the Baroque, heavy and almost depressing, enveloped in large masses of tones in strong light and shadow, cannot be explained by the spiritual evolution of the time alone. The technical change in painting from tempera and fresco to oil must have been greatly responsible for this surprising transition.

Now, compared with oil, water evaporates more quickly. So with water-colours of tempera, it is not easy to envelope a large space with deep shadow, as with oil painting. Just as oil painting shows a natural inclination for tonal expressions of the whole by distributing light and shadow in large contrasted masses, water colours of tempera encourage linear expressions of detail with outlines and hatchings in even, diffused light and in decorative arrangements. These are, briefly speaking, the natural consequences arising from material and technique. Italian painters of the Early Renaissance, continually practising in this special technique of tempera, have come to develop a splendid art of linear arrangement, rhythm and movement, which artists of any other country in Europe could not surpass. The enchanting beauty of lines evidenced by Simone Martini especially in his masterpiece of the Annunciation and by Botticelli, above all, in the Birth of Venus, in the Madonna of the Magnificat and in the Annunciation, can only find their companions in the Far East, where artists had their linear sensibilities cultivated to an extreme degree by the exclusive and constant practise of line drawings in water colours throughout their history.

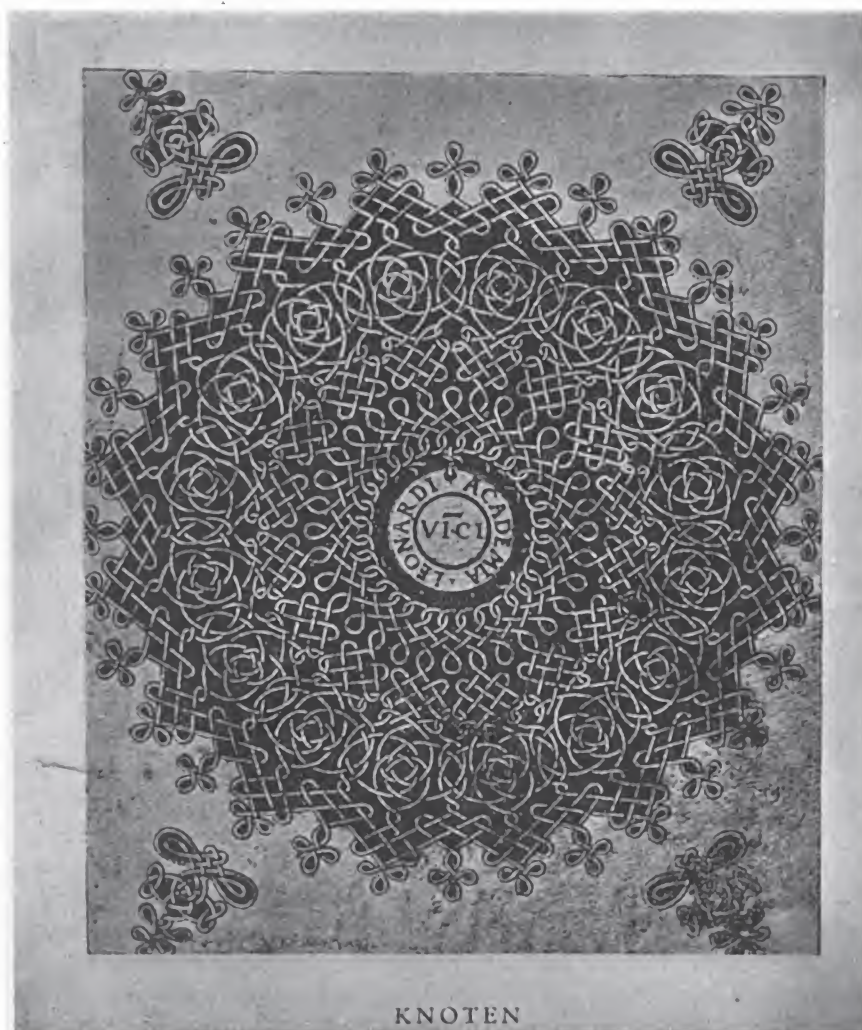
Line does not exist in Nature. Nature exists only in masses. In contrast to the tonal expression in masses and volumes, which is the most rational way of representing Nature, and for which oil painting is most suited, the linear expression of tempera and water colours has a tendency to get away from the strong sen-



se of reality and to be endowed with some spiritual feeling, poetic or religious. This is the reason, why Tre-and Quattrocento paintings appeal to our sentiment with their half-decorative, half-imaginative values, remote and pathetic, rather than overwhelm us with a strong sense of reality. Just so, master-pieces of Japanese painting, especially Buddhist painting, play on us an enchantment by means of linear rhythm and movement, decoratively beautiful, and sentimentally appealing, at the same time.

Then again, there is a common charm of colours, between Italian tempera and Japanese water colours. In contrast to the deep, transparent colour-effects of oil painting, prone to get darker by accumulations of shadows, the colour-effects of tempera and water colours are opaque, flat, delicate and hazy, and this hazy grayish atmosphere, enveloping the whole co-

lour-schemes, polychromatic and decorative, give them a dreamy, aspiring feeling, as if we long for something hidden beyond the mist. The gold background, which was frequent in the Trecento, heightens this effect all the more. Now, old Japanese Buddhist paintings, with golden figures of ideal beauty of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, scroll-paintings, representing religious legends and poetical romances in the setting of rich variegated landscape, large screen-paintings, decorating the rooms with representations of trees and flowers of the four seasons of the year, which Japanese are so fond of, all these Japanese paintings, which are peculiarly Japanese in material and technique, are painted almost in the same colour-effects as the Italian, full of decorative and poetic beauty. When Japanese-painters come over to Europe, they are invariably attracted and fa-



Design of knotted  
cords by Leonardo  
da Vinci.



scinated by the colours of Italian tempera and frescoes, particularly of Masolino at S. Clemente in Rome or at Castiglione d'Olena, of Piero della Francesca at Arezzo and at Borgo San Sepolcro, and of Botticelli in the Primavera and in the Birth of Venus, which they are inclined to call almost « Japanese » in the sense of colours.

With the foregoing, I think, I have made clear to you, so far as is possible in this brief talk of mine, how Italian fresco-and tempera paintings of the Tre-and Quattrocento have developed forms of art, which are very similar to Japanese painting in artistic effects. It goes without saying, that Italian and Japanese paintings are widely different in subject-matters, Italian painting chiefly representing human figures and Japanese painting more preoccupied with landscapes and flowers, and that they do not look much alike in general constructions. But if you analyse them in details, you are sure to find many interesting features in common, which point to a similar sense of beauty ruling the two.

In concluding, how I interpret the much-di-

scussed « Oriental » character in the Tre- and Quattrocento painting, I might summarize my ideas, first, that I can neither recognize nor admit any direct influence of Chinese art on the Italian, although there were some slight intercommunications between China and Italy at the time; second, that Persian miniatures might have had some influence on Italian painting, which however should not be exaggerated; third, that Italian tempera and Far Eastern paintings, especially Japanese, had many common points in the use of water-colours, and that this great similarity in painter's technique and material, combined with similarities in Nature and racial character, produced in the arts of the two countries a remarkably brother-like affinity in the sense of beauty. The presence of this spiritual affinity with the East in the Tre- and Quattrocento might well be called « Oriental » in distinction from the Cinquecento and the Baroque, which are entirely Occidental in artistic effects.

Yukio Yashiro



Monuments of Southern Italy: the ancient basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari.